

## MODERN DISPENSATIONALISM AND THE LAW OF GOD

IN a recent article in the QUARTERLY<sup>1</sup> it was pointed out that the greatest peril in modern Dispensationalism is that it is, or at least tends to be, destructive of the unity and therefore of the harmony of Scripture. The dividing of Scripture into dispensations in each of which "man is tested in respect of obedience to some *specific* revelation of the will of God",<sup>2</sup> leads to the sharp contrasting of one dispensation with another and to the excluding from one of the distinctive characteristics of another with the result that the Bible ceases to be a self-consistent whole. Closely related to this fundamental error and partly responsible for it, partly the result of it, is a serious misunderstanding of the true nature and purpose of the Law of God. It is the design of the present article to show that the antithesis drawn between law and grace which finds startling illustration in the dispensational treatment of the Lord's Prayer originates, so far at least as the *Scofield Bible* is concerned, in the attempt which is made at Gen. xii. 1 to set the Dispensation of Promise as being "wholly gracious and unconditional", sharply in contrast with the Dispensation of Law which follows it.

### I

The writer well remembers the shock which he received when, through Mauro's *The Gospel of the Kingdom*,<sup>3</sup> his attention was first directed to the footnote in the *Scofield Bible* which in describing the fourth dispensation, states that "The Dispensation of Promise ended when Israel rashly accepted the law" (Exodus xix. 8).<sup>4</sup> He could hardly believe that such a statement actually appeared in this widely used reference Bible. The statement is so shocking that the attempt has been made, perhaps frequently, to excuse or explain it by saying that "rashly" simply means that, *in sinful self-reliance*, the Israelites said, "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do," when what they should

<sup>1</sup> See article entitled "Modern Dispensationalism and the Doctrine of the Unity of Scripture" by the present writer in the issue of January 15th, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> *Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 5, note 4.

<sup>3</sup> p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> p. 20, note 1.

have said was this, "With the Lord's help, all that the Lord hath spoken we will do." But that this is not Dr. Scofield's meaning, he has made abundantly clear elsewhere. In *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* he tells us expressly, "In the Wilderness of Sinai He proposed to them the Covenant of Law. Instead of humbly pleading for a continued relation of grace, they presumptuously answered: 'All that the Lord hath spoken we will do.'"<sup>1</sup> This explanation makes the matter even worse. They not merely acted "rashly", they acted "presumptuously", and with tragic consequences to themselves and their descendants. For when they "rashly accepted the Law" they forfeited the favourable status, which they had enjoyed under a covenant that was "wholly gracious and unconditional". In a word, "at Sinai they exchanged grace for law".

Let us turn to Exodus xix. 8 which according to the *Scofield Bible* records this rash act of the Israelites. It reads as follows:

"And all the people answered together, and said, All that the Lord hath spoken we will do. And Moses returned the words of the people unto the Lord."

This was an act of *rashness*! Now let us turn to the preceding verses and see the immediate occasion for it. Israel had come out of Egypt, had crossed the Red Sea, had come to Sinai. Then we read:

"3. And Moses went up unto God, and the Lord called unto him out of the mountain, saying, Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel;

4. Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and *how* I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself.

5. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine:

6. And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These *are* the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel.

7. And Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before their faces all these words which the Lord commanded him."

It was in response to this gracious and glorious invitation, that Israel said: "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do." And in so doing, we are told, "they rashly accepted the law"! The notes in the margin of the *Scofield Bible* on this passage should be carefully studied. They are as follows:

"It is exceedingly important to observe: (1) that Jehovah reminded the people that hitherto they had been the objects of His free grace; (2) that the law

<sup>1</sup> p. 22.

is not proposed as a means of life, but as a means by which Israel might become 'a peculiar treasure' and a 'kingdom of priests'; (3) that the law was not *imposed* until it had been *proposed* and voluntarily accepted. The *principle* is stated in Gal. v. 1-4.<sup>1</sup>

" Cf. 1 Peter ii. 9; Rev. i. 6; v. 10. What, under law, was *condition*, is under grace, freely *given* to every believer. The 'if' of verse 5 is the essence of law as a method of divine dealing, and the fundamental reason why 'the law made nothing perfect' (Rom. viii. 3; Heb. vii. 18, 19). The Abrahamic (Gen. xv. 18, *note*) and New (Heb. viii. 8-12, *note*) covenants minister salvation and assurance because they impose but one condition, faith."<sup>2</sup>

The attitude to the Sinaitic Covenant and the interpretation of it which is expressed in these footnotes is so contrary to the plain teachings of Scripture that a somewhat detailed discussion of the positions taken and the proof-texts cited must be entered upon.

As to the first of the footnotes something must be said regarding each of its three observations:

"(1) That Jehovah reminded the people that hitherto they had been the objects of His free grace." All that immediately precedes verse 5 is the brief injunction to Moses to say to the people, "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians and how I bare you on eagles' wings and brought you unto myself." The statement is indeed a striking one. The deliverance from the bondage of Egypt was truly an act of free and sovereign grace. It was so wonderful a demonstration of divine omnipotence that their journey might indeed be likened to the flight of an eagle. But this does not mean, as would seem to be implied, that up to this point there had been no demand made upon them for obedience, that they were borne aloft to Sinai "on flowery beds of ease", without any exertion of body or exercise of will on their part. The preceding narrative makes it plain that the journey from Egypt to Sinai was a long and wearisome pilgrimage, through the sea and over the desert sands, an experience which tested them in the school of faith and of obedience and which was attended by hardships at which they more than once rebelled. It was because they believed the Lord and obeyed his servant Moses and followed the pillar of cloud and of fire that they came at last to stand before God at His holy mountain. Such passages as Exodus iii. 18; iv. 8, 9, 31; xii. 28, 35; xiv. 15, 22, 29 make this abundantly clear. The journey to Sinai was a parable of the life of the believer in every

<sup>1</sup> This footnote refers to the words, "Thus shalt thou say" of verse 3.

<sup>2</sup> This footnote refers to the words "If ye will obey" of verse 5.

age ; it was marked at every step by the free and sovereign grace of God, and it challenged and demanded at every step the faith and the obedience of His children.

“(2) That the law is not proposed as a means of life, but as a means by which Israel might become ‘ a peculiar treasure ’ and a ‘ kingdom of priests.’ ” It should be noted that the invitation which Moses is commanded to lay before the Israelites says nothing about law. It says simply this, “ if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant ”. They knew of the covenant made with their fathers and that it was in faithfulness to this covenant that the God of their fathers had brought them out of Egypt. They knew that because of this covenant they were in a peculiar sense the *people* of the God of Abraham. For He had said to Pharaoh, “ Let my people go, that they may serve me.” Obedience had already been very definitely required of them. The death angel had spared their first born because they kept the Passover as commanded by Moses and Aaron (Exodus xii. 21-28) and the regular observance of the Passover and of the Feast of Unleavened Bread had been made mandatory before they left Egypt. It later was made a part of the Sinaitic legislation. Obedience had also been declared to be the condition of physical well-being (xv. 26). Clearly obedience was no innovation first proposed at Sinai. The invitation of verse 5 was in perfect accord with the Abrahamic covenant. There is no intimation that in assenting to it Israel was undertaking a work of supererogation. Furthermore it might well be argued that if accepting the covenant was simply intended to secure the people special blessings and privileges, the breaking of it should only have involved the forfeiture of the same. But it does more than this. The penalty of disobedience is not return to the former status (the covenant of promise) but the loss of everything good, even destruction and death.

“(3) That the law was not *imposed* until it had been *proposed* and voluntarily accepted.” It is noteworthy that this conception of the acceptance of the covenant at Sinai as *optional* with Israel, is nowhere taught in Scripture. On the contrary the covenant is expressly represented as a *commandment to be obeyed*. We have spoken of it as an invitation. But if the invitation of an earthly king is a command, how much more that of the divine King! Moses says of it: “ And he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, *even* ten commandments ;

and he wrote them upon two tables of stone.”<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah is particularly insistent as to this. What is stated in Exodus xv. 26 and xix. 6 in terms of a condition, he clearly regards as a command: “But this thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people.”<sup>2</sup> Finally it is to be noted that the New Testament passage (Gal. v. 1-4) appealed to as stating the principle involved, does not prove that the obedience required in Exodus xix. 5 was a voluntary work of supererogation. It does assert this of circumcision, *after* the ceremonial law had been done away in Christ, which is something quite different. Verse 6 of that chapter is especially applicable to this discussion for it declares that “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love,” thereby setting forth clearly the principle that obedience is the necessary result of faith.

That according to the *Scofield Bible* the obedience demanded by the law was a work of supererogation, a voluntary condition which Israel was at liberty to accept or refuse, is made still plainer by the second of the above footnotes. 1 Peter ii. 9 and Rev. i. 6; v. 10 are appealed to as proving that the enviable status offered to Israel at Mount Sinai was ultimately to be “*freely* given to every believer”. Since all of these New Testament passages clearly refer to Exodus xix. 5f., there can be no dispute as to the desirability of the status that is there offered Israel. All will agree that the Israelites were justified in wanting it, that they were to be commended for this. But it was at this point, according to the *Scofield Bible* that Israel made a tragic mistake; they did not count the cost, they did not stop to think about the condition attached to the attaining of their desire. This glorious “position” was later to be “freely given” to them “under grace” in the future Dispensation of Grace. But Israel rashly attempted to obtain it at Mount Sinai on disadvantageous, even impossible terms, by accepting the “if” of verse 5, “if ye will obey my voice indeed”. That was law! By agreeing to the “if” condition imposed by God, the people ceased to be “the objects of His free grace”; they passed from faith-status to law-status. Romans viii. 3 and Hebrews vii. 18, 19 are cited to show the inadequacy of the law because of this “if”; and in the note at Heb. viii. 8-12 it is declared that the New Covenant

<sup>1</sup> Deut. iv. 13. Cf. Josh. vii. 11, xxiii. 16; Judges ii. 20; 2 Kings xviii. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Jer. vii. 23. Cf. xi. 3-7.

rests on "better (i.e. unconditional) promises". But it is to be observed that not one of these passages attributes the imperfection of the law to the fact that it requires obedience, but rather to the fact to which the note on Heb. viii. 8-12 itself calls attention, that the law was not able to secure the obedience which it required. The New Covenant is better than the Old because it rests on better promises and is more efficacious in securing that very obedience which the Mosaic law could not secure. For it declares expressly: "I will put my laws in their inward parts and write it in their hearts" (Jer. xxxi. 33). And Romans viii. 3 is followed by Romans viii. 4 which declares that the purpose of the incarnation and atonement was that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in those "who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit".

Since the Epistle to the Hebrews is especially appealed to as proving that the condition imposed in Exodus xix. 5, the "if" of obedience, made the law inferior to the promise, it is particularly important to notice that instead of doing this the Epistle does just the opposite. One of the most urgent and impressive appeals in the whole Epistle is the ominously solemn and thrice-repeated exhortation, "to-day, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts" (iii. 7, 15; iv. 7). This exhortation is couched in the words of Psalm xcv. 7f., where the disobedience of the Israelites who came out of Egypt is cited as the reason for their failure to secure the rest of Canaan. The writer then proceeds to argue that since the exhortation to obedience is repeated "after so long a time", i.e., "in David", the possibility of entering the promised rest must have been still open in David's day and if open then must still be open to the men of his own day. So he urges his readers to avail themselves of it. In other words, the "if" of obedience, with the terrible penalty of disobedience which was presented to God's people in the days of Moses and of David, is equally binding for the gospel age. And it is important for our present purpose to notice that the "if ye will hear his voice" of Psalm xcv. 7 which according to the argument of the Epistle is equally applicable to Moses, to David, and to the New Testament believer, is almost *exactly the expression* (but for the change of person) used in Exodus xix. 5 and rendered "if ye will obey my voice indeed"<sup>1</sup> in the A.V.

<sup>1</sup> In Exodus xix. 5 the infinitive absolute is added to the finite verb for the sake of emphasis "if obeying ye will obey".

The one condition laid down in Exodus xix. 5 was *obedience*. That condition held good according to Hebrews in the days of Moses, and of David; and it also holds good even and especially in "these last days" under the New covenant of which the writer speaks.<sup>1</sup>

## II

It is hard to understand how any one who has read the lives of the Patriarchs with any attention could attempt to exclude *obedience* from the Covenant of Promise and to decry the Covenant at Sinai because it requires obedience. Yet as we have seen this attempt is made in the *Scofield Bible* in the interest of a clear cut distinction between the Dispensation of Promise as "unconditional", and the Dispensation of Law with its conditional "if". Abraham in particular is the great Biblical example and type of faith. But of all the children of men, not one was ever tested in the school of obedience as was Abraham. The first word of the Call is a command, "Get thee out" (xii. 1); and this is only the first of many commands that are given to him. "Walk before me and be thou perfect" (xvii. 1) is another. And the broader meaning of this obedience is clearly brought out in xviii. 19 which reads in the R.V.: "For I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice; to the end that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him." Here again the close connection between faith and obedience is set forth with unmistakable plainness. The word "know" refers not to God's fore-knowledge of what Abraham will do, but approximates closely in meaning to the word "choose" (cf. Amos iii. 2). The purpose of God's knowing, or recognizing, or regarding Abraham is not Abraham's personal salvation alone, but the redemption of the world through the universal sweep of the promise made to him, and that promise is conditioned on obedience to the will of God, and that obedience to the will of God presupposes the knowledge of that will, which

<sup>1</sup> The close connection which exists between faith and obedience is further illustrated by the fact that Heb. iii.-iv., in describing the sin of the Israelites of Moses' day which barred that generation from entering the land of promise, and Rom. x.-xi., in speaking of the casting off of Israel both describe it as a sin of disbelief (*ἀπιστία*) and of disobedience (*ἀπειθεία*). It is even more clearly illustrated in Heb. xi., which is filled with examples of what Paul in Rom. i. 5 and xvi. 26 strikingly calls the "obedience of faith".

is to be carefully preserved and transmitted in the line of Abraham.

The supreme test of Abraham's faith was his obedience to the command to sacrifice Isaac : " Take now thy son, thine only *son* Isaac, whom thou lovest and get thee into the land of Moriah ; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of " (xxii. 2). The narrative shows wonderful reserve and reticence. But here in the command word after word is, and is intended to be, a stab—a testing of faith by a summons to obedience. " Thy son—thine only—Isaac—whom thou lovest—offer him—a burnt offering." In Hebrews this act of obedience is expressly called an act of faith : " by faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac " (xi. 17), and the writer then proceeds to enlarge upon the greatness of this act of obedient faith. James so understood it when he said, " Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar ? "

We come now to what may not inaptly be called the Old Testament obituary of Abraham, as distinguished from the great New Testament obituary in Hebrews xi. It is contained in Gen. xxvi. 5, " Because that Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws." With these words Abraham's life of faith is summarized in terms of obedience and this obedience is given as the reason the promise is now confirmed to Isaac, Abraham's heir, the child of promise. Dispensationalists are very fond of speaking of " key-verses " in the various books of the Bible. Here is certainly a key-verse for the understanding of the Dispensation of Promise. It is full of the phraseology which is later made so familiar by the Mosaic law. It begins with the words, " because that Abraham obeyed my voice " (cf. Gen. xxii. 18). This is exactly what Exodus xix. 5 tells us that Israel was exhorted to do at Mount Sinai. It proves conclusively that the requirement of obedience was nothing new in God's dealing with His people. And the statement does not stop with this broad and comprehensive declaration ; it is strikingly specific. It goes on to say, " and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws ". All of these words are later used again and again of the Mosaic laws and ordinances. But for the anachronism it would involve, we might think that Abraham lived under the Mosaic law, or that we were reading not the obituary of Abraham but of Moses



or David or Ezra, men who magnified the law of God and made it honourable. If there is any verse in the Bible which shows that the Abrahamic and the Mosaic Covenants are essentially one and the same in their requirements, it is this verse. How does Dr. Scofield treat it, how does he reconcile it with his contention that obedience first became a condition of the covenant when Israel rashly accepted the law? The only answer we can give to this very proper question is that no attention of any kind is paid to this verse in the *Scofield Bible*. It has no footnote. There are no marginal references. If it forms a link in any of the chain references, there is nothing to indicate this. The verse is as completely ignored as if it were no part of Scripture or had no bearing at all on the question whether obedience was required of the patriarchs under the Abrahamic Covenant, the so-called dispensation of promise, or whether it was an innovation proposed, a work of supererogation first suggested, at Sinai. The reason it is ignored would seem to be that it is plainly impossible to interpret it in such a way as to make it mean anything else than that the Dispensation of Promise required obedience just as definitely as did the Dispensation of Law.<sup>1</sup>

### III

The fundamental error in the attitude toward the Sinaitic covenant which is shown in the *Scofield Bible* lies in the failure to distinguish between the law as a covenant of works and the law as a ministration or dispensation of the covenant of grace, in other words in the failure to recognize that the Sinaitic covenant belongs to the covenant of grace.<sup>2</sup>

“Obedience to his revealed will” is the immutable requirement made by God of all His creatures.<sup>3</sup> But “personal, entire,

<sup>1</sup> The following words of Oehler, whose *Theology of the Old Testament* has been for fifty years a widely used treatise, are very much to the point: “The covenant of promise with Abraham was made upon the condition that he and his descendants bind themselves to a godly life and to obedience to God’s will, Gen. xvii. 1-, xviii., xix. The same condition is prescribed to the people in Exodus xix. 5 and accepted by the people, verse 8; comp. 24. 3 (p. 181).” In fact the very definition which the *Scofield Bible* gives of a dispensation as “a period of time when man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God” runs directly counter to the attempt which is made in it to eliminate obedience from the requirements of the Dispensation of Promise and also from that of Grace.

<sup>2</sup> In saying this we do not mean that the gracious aspect of the Sinai covenant is not recognized in the *Scofield Bible*. The note on p. 93 which precedes the two which have been especially discussed above, calls attention to this quite definitely. But this does not prevent the author from representing the law as inferior to the Promise because it demanded obedience.

<sup>3</sup> *Westminster Longer Catechism*, Question 91. The discussion which follows is based largely on Chapters vii., xix. and xx. of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

exact and perpetual obedience" is impossible to man since the fall. Consequently the law as a covenant of works can only minister condemnation to all men. For "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God". Because of this, God in His infinite mercy was pleased to make a second covenant with man, the covenant of grace, in which He "freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved". This covenant of grace was first announced in the words of the Protevangel (Gen. iii. 15), is set forth with increasing clearness in the rest of the Old Testament; and the terms of this covenant are fully met in the saving work of Christ, as it is set forth in the New Testament. Under this covenant, faith in Christ has ever been the sole requirement, the sole ground of justification. The true believer is entirely freed from the terror and bondage of the law as a covenant of works, by which he is to be justified or condemned. But it is to be remembered that the moral law as a rule of life informing men of the will of God and their duty to obey it continues to be binding upon the believer, not as the ground but as the fruit of justification. Justification is by faith alone. But justification has its fruit in sanctification. Men are not saved *in* sin but *from* sin. And sin is "any lack of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God". "They who, upon pretence of Christian liberty, do practise any sin, or cherish any lust, do thereby destroy the end of Christian liberty; which is, that, being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life." Since sanctification is never complete in this life the believer ever needs the law as a rule of life lest through wilfulness or ignorance he sin against God. The believer who cherishes malice and hatred in his heart toward a brother is still carnal and needs to be constantly reminded of the words of Christ, "If ye forgive not men their trespasses neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." The believer who is spiritual and truly loves his fellowmen will not willingly do ill to his neighbour. He has no desire to kill him, to steal from him, or to witness falsely against him. In his relation to his brother, love is the fulfilling of the law. Yet even such an one needs to know and be governed by the law of God, that his love may express itself aright, lest with good intention he sin ignorantly against his brother and against God.

Let us apply what has just been stated to the dispensational interpretation of Scripture. The covenant of grace of which we have been speaking was introduced during the first dispensation recognized in the *Scofield Bible* and all subsequent dispensations are parts of it. The Dispensation of Promise is such a part. Abraham is the great Biblical illustration of faith. He was justified by faith; but that faith was constantly tested in the school of obedience. God made known to Abraham His will and Abraham believed and obeyed. The Book of Genesis mentions altar and sacrifice as a way by which the patriarchs approached God, but little is said as to their meaning. The Dispensation of Law which followed that of Promise was also a ministration of the covenant of grace. Its two most conspicuous features are the Decalogue and the Altar. In the Decalogue, the moral law as a perpetual rule of obedience was proclaimed by the voice of God Himself under circumstances of sublime and awful impressiveness. Immediately thereafter the law of the altar was summarily declared. Later the whole ritual of sacrifice was made known in detail. Its meaning has been summarized for us in the familiar words of the Epistle to the Hebrews, "without the shedding of blood there is no remission". In this respect the Sinaitic covenant represents a very marked advance upon everything that preceded it. Its typical ordinances definitely prefigure "Christ, His graces, actions, sufferings and benefits". Hence the covenant of Sinai magnified both law and grace, both obedience and faith. This is shown most clearly in the Name of the Lord as proclaimed at Sinai: "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means spare *the guilty*; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth *generation*" (Exodus xxxiv. 6f.). The law of Sinai did not "disannul" the promise; on the contrary in both of its aspects, law and grace, it constituted a notable advance upon it. The covenant of Sinai was indeed a glorious law (Deut. iv. 7-8) and when used lawfully it was a gracious covenant by which the Old Testament believer was justified by faith in the grace of God in Christ, as set forth in the ritual of the altar with its ministering priests. The law was indeed a school-master to point men to Christ.

When we pass on to the Dispensation of Grace we find that there is the same close and vital connection between it and the Dispensation of Law as we have observed between the Law and the Promise. The relation of the Gospel to the Law is set forth by our Lord with unmistakable clearness in the sermon on the Mount where the full meaning of the Ten Commandments is illustrated and where our Lord defines his mission :

“ 17. Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets : I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.

18. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

19. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven : but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

And the two great commandments of Jesus (Matt. xxii. 34f.) and the new commandment of the Apostle John (1 John ii. 8) are old commandments which are found in the law of Moses (Deut. vi. 5, Lev. xix. 18). John tells us plainly that we have a right to say we know Christ only “if we keep His commandments”. And Paul expresses the ideal for which the Christian is to strive when he exhorts him to bring “every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ”. Jesus fulfilled the law in His life of perfect obedience and by His atoning death. He justified the believer and freed him from bondage to the law as a means of justification ; and He also much strengthened the obligation of the believer to holiness of life, by his teachings regarding the will of God, by His own perfect example of loving obedience to that will, and by sending the Holy Spirit to sanctify His people in the truth.

It is both right and necessary that the Christian should magnify the grace of God and declare and insist that salvation is by faith alone and not by the works of the law. Legalism was one of the perils of Israel under the Mosaic law, although that law should have made it plain to all that “by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified in the sight of God”. It is no less a peril to-day. But in guarding against legal self-righteousness, it is important that we avoid the other extreme of antinomianism. The attitude taken in the *Scofield Bible* to the Sinaitic covenant is distinctly antinomian. It makes obedience to the will of God a work of supererogation which Israel should never have agreed to, and declares that the Dispensation of

Promise and the Dispensation of Grace "impose but one condition, faith". This is definitely antinomian. And many, perhaps most, Dispensationalists do not regard the Decalogue as intended for the church age.

Since the days of the apostles, there is probably no one who has been more concerned to establish and safeguard the liberty of the Christian than was Martin Luther. Luther, like Paul, had made a most earnest effort to attain righteousness by keeping the law. Paul had sought this righteousness as a Jew, a Pharisee; Luther sought it as a Catholic, a monk. Both had failed and utterly. And then there was made known to them—to Paul by revelation, to Luther by reading the epistles of Paul—the blessed doctrine of justification by faith. Galatians was Luther's favourite epistle. He found in it the charter of Christian liberty. Having felt so keenly the bondage of the law, we might expect that Luther's attitude toward it would be similar to that of the modern dispensationalist. But Luther's Catechism includes an exposition of the Ten Commandments, and in the Preface to his Commentary on Galatians after pointing out that during a ministry of twenty years he had witnessed the rise of more than twenty sects he goes on to say in characteristic-ly vigorous fashion :

" But Satan, the god of all dissension, stirreth up daily new sects, and last of all (which of all others I should never have foreseen or once suspected) he hath raised up a sect of such as teach that the Ten Commandments ought to be taken out of the church, and that men should not be terrified with the law, but gently exhorted by the preaching of the grace of Christ . . ."

The fact that most dispensationalists are too Biblical to adopt a consistently antinomian attitude toward the law of God does not lessen the danger of such an attitude toward the law of obedience as is found in the *Scofield Bible*.

#### IV

An excellent illustration of the danger of misinterpreting Scripture through failure to observe carefully the distinctions clearly drawn in it is circumcision.<sup>1</sup> Circumcision belongs to what the *Scofield Bible* calls the Dispensation of Promise. It is referred to first in Gen. xvii. and is there made the sign of God's covenant with Abraham. It is to be noted that its

<sup>1</sup> The subject of circumcision is especially appropriate because Gal. v. 1-4 is appealed to in the footnote to Exodus xix. 3 in the *Scofield Bible*.

observance is made for Abraham and his descendants a matter of utmost importance. The disobedient is to be "cut off from his people" (verses 13 f.). This is noteworthy because it shows that the covenant promise as made with Abraham was not "unconditional" as the *Scofield Bible* asserts. On the contrary a very definite condition is attached to it. In this respect Abraham lived under law. He was commanded to observe the rite of circumcision; and the narrative is careful to inform us that he did so. This act of obedience is represented in Rom. iv. 11 as "a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised". Abraham, Paul tells us, was justified by faith before the sign of circumcision was given, but after that sign was given, the rite became the seal of a faith-righteousness, because it represented an act of the obedience of faith, that is of the obedience which must result from a faith which is worthy of the name. Yet we turn to Galatians and there we find circumcision treated as the very sign and symbol of a legal righteousness, which is the direct antithesis of justification by faith. This may seem strange, but there are two very simple reasons for it. The first is that circumcision which was originally given as the sign of a gracious promise had been made by the self-righteous Jews the mark of a works-righteousness which nullified that promise. The second is that the new covenant has fulfilled and abolished the Old Testament ceremonial law and replaced circumcision with baptism, which nearly all evangelical denominations consider so obligatory as to be properly made a precondition to membership in the Christian Church.

What we are particularly concerned to point out is this, that a rite which, according to Gal. v. 1-4, the Dispensationalist must regard as a symbol, almost a slogan, of Jewish legalism, was originally not a Mosaic law, but the sign and seal of the covenant of promise, yet a sign that must be observed under the severest penalty. Thus circumcision cuts directly athwart the distinction which he draws between the two contrasted dispensations of Promise and Law, and shows that the Abrahamic promise and the Mosaic law were essentially one.

## V

Before concluding this discussion it may be well to observe that, like the dispensationalist, the higher critic has serious difficulty with Gen. xxvi. 5. As is well known, one of the most

assured results of the Higher Criticism is claimed to be the late date and composite character of the Pentateuch. It is made up, we are told, of four major documents (J, E, D, P)<sup>1</sup> the oldest of which is post-Davidic and the latest post-exilic. Its three legal codes are assigned to E, P and D respectively, the order of formation being E, D and P. According to this reconstruction, the bulk of the professedly Mosaic legislation belongs to P and is to be regarded as post-exilic (500-450 B.C.). The Deuteronomic laws (D) are assigned to the time of the reform of Josiah (622 B.C.). The Book of the Covenant is assigned to E (c. 750 B.C.).<sup>2</sup> In a word all of these professedly Mosaic laws are post-Mosaic in the judgment of the critics.

Now it is to be noted that the task of these law-givers as conceived of by the critics involved something which is not ordinarily thought of as within their province. Having attributed to their laws the antiquity and authority of Mosaic legislation, they were obliged to turn historian and make history support their claim lest their deception be discovered. Thus the authors of the Deuteronomic Code were obliged to *edit* the historical material contained in the Books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings in such a way as to indicate that their laws, although actually introduced in the reign of Josiah (622 B.C.) were regarded as Mosaic from the time of the Conquest. The Priestly legislators of the post-exilic period, did not, it would seem, consider it wise simply to further edit and revise the history contained in the Books of Joshua to 2 Kings. Instead they prepared or had prepared a priestly history, the Books of Chronicles, which is to be regarded as "an imaginative priestly recast of Jewish history".<sup>3</sup> Such history is history written with a purpose; it is subjectively coloured, not objectively correct.

Thus far the theory of the critics is at least logical. Forged laws necessitate forged history. If these "Mosaic" laws are an anachronism, the history that treats them as Mosaic must be similarly anachronistic. But at this point a difficulty arises. How about the pre-Mosaic period? It is at least understandable that men who forged the "Mosaic" laws would make the history

<sup>1</sup> In this brief discussion, the Holiness Code (Lev. xvii.-xxvi.) is included in the Priest Code (P) with which it is closely connected.

<sup>2</sup> To the earliest document J (c. 850-800 B.C.) no specific code is assigned, although many critics find a so-called "Decalogue of J" in Ex. xxxiv. As to the Decalogue itself (Ex. xx.), the most fundamental of all the Mosaic laws, the critics differ widely as to its date.

<sup>3</sup> *The Short Bible*, edited by Goodspeed and Smith, p. 222.

support their forgery. But what reason would there be for carrying "Mosaic" laws back into the pre-Mosaic period? This would certainly be zeal not according to knowledge. It would be a gross anachronism, the critics themselves being judges. Consequently they have been loath to admit the presence of Deuteronomic or Priestly legal elements in Genesis.<sup>1</sup> But this is hardly to be avoided. Cornill,<sup>2</sup> who stands in high repute in critical circles, in speaking of the work of the Deuteronomic redactor says: "In GENESIS only one clear trace of his work is visible, in xxvi. 5."<sup>3</sup>

The reason the critics who adopt the view that Deuteronomy is *late* cannot avoid admitting that the hand of the Deuteronomist or of a still later writer (P) is visible in this verse in Genesis which describes the career of Abraham is obvious. The verse is full of legal terminology. It begins with the words, "obeyed my voice". This phrase, which is the least technical of the expressions used in this verse, occurs elsewhere in the Pentateuch in both J and E, but is especially characteristic of D where it occurs twenty-one times. It is not found in P. The word "charge" appears first in Exodus xii. 6. It does not occur in J or E; it occurs in D once (ix. 1), in P thirty-seven times. "Commandments" occurs first in Exodus xv. 26. It is rare in J and E. It appears about forty times in D.<sup>5</sup> "Statutes" occurs first in Exodus xii. 14, only once in J E (Exodus xiii. 10), seven times in D, but forty-six times in P. "Laws" occurs first in Exodus xii. 49. It is found a few times in J and E and twenty-two times in Deuteronomy. In P it occurs in the singular and usually of a specific law twenty-six times. Not one of these four technical law-terms, as we may call them, which are used in Gen. xxvi. 5—charge, commandments, statutes,<sup>6</sup> laws—

<sup>1</sup> Fifty years ago Kuenen (*The Hexateuch*, p. 259) dismissed quite summarily Colenso's claim that a large number of passages in Genesis—xxvi. 5 among them—should be assigned to "the Deuteronomist himself or to one or more redactors working upon his lines". His main objection is stated in these words: "It is hard to conceive of a writer or a school that could enrich Genesis" with the verses suggested by Colenso.

<sup>2</sup> *Introduction*, p. 140.

<sup>3</sup> Creelman (*Introduction*, p. 20) lists Gen. xxvi. 5 with xv. 18 and xviii. 19 as among those "which have been supposed by different authorities to have the characteristics of D, at least in some measure." Driver (*Commentary on Genesis*, p. 250) declares that "No such expressions are used elsewhere in connection with the patriarchs. The obedience of Abraham is described here [Gen. xxvi. 5] in terms borrowed from the later Mosaic law." Skinner (*Commentary on Genesis*, p. 364) remarks that the second part of xxvi. 5 is made up of "Priestly and Deuteronomic expressions".

<sup>4</sup>  $\text{עָשָׂה}$  construed with the preposition  $\text{בְּ}$ .

<sup>5</sup> It is nearly always in the plural, only twice in the singular.

<sup>6</sup> It should perhaps be pointed out that the word rendered "statute" is used (but in the masculine, not, as in Gen. xxvi. 5, the feminine form) in Gen. xlvii. 22, 26 of regulations made by Joseph in Egypt. But this has no direct bearing on the matter in hand.



occurs elsewhere in the Book of Genesis, i.e. is used of the patriarchal period. The first occurrence of three of them is in Exodus xii., the other appears first in Exodus xv. All of them are used of laws and institutions represented as *Mosaic*. They are used rarely in J and E, which the critics regard as the earliest documents of the Pentateuch, but only in reference to the Mosaic age. All occur and most of them occur frequently in D, and even more often in P. Consequently the critic is forced to admit that his Deuteronomic or Priestly editor has been guilty of a serious anachronism; he has made Abraham an observer of "Mosaic" laws.

This verse serves as a good illustration of the truth of a rather remarkable confession made by a most enthusiastic higher critic, Professor J. E. McFadyen. In speaking of certain alleged contradictions in Scripture he says: "Criticism has a simple solution of these contradictions, but though it can explain them, it cannot remove or explain them away."<sup>1</sup> What a confession of the futility of much of the higher criticism! Of what use is it to learn about different sources, conflicting traditions, anachronisms and errors, if the difficulty is not removed or explained away?

## VI

*Because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes and my laws.* This verse may be a stumbling block to the Higher Critic and the Dispensationalist. But how wonderfully it illustrates the essential unity and harmony of Scripture! It might almost seem as if this emphatic statement regarding the obedience of Abraham, with its heaping up of legal phraseology, was intended to be a warning against the misunderstanding of the covenant of grace which has ever attended its proclamation. The Critic objects to the occurrence here of "Mosaic" phraseology which he must regard as an anachronism. Dr. Scofield ignores it because it destroys his pet theory that the Abrahamic covenant was "unconditional", which he understands to mean, faith quite apart from obedience to the law of God. But this verse shows with unmistakable plainness that the path of *obedience* lies directly before the feet of all who have heard the call to *faith*.

<sup>1</sup> *Old Testament Scenes and Characters*, p. 21.

“Trust and obey” expresses it simply and clearly; and “there’s no other way”. “By faith Abraham, when he was called . . . obeyed.” Moses did the same. Paul was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision. All the sons of God of every age but follow in their train, and the obedience which is required of them is so perfect, so unattainable, that those who seek it most earnestly, find it ever leading their feet to Calvary, that there they may obtain mercy and find grace to enable them to keep the commandments of Him who is the author and the finisher of their faith.

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